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ABSTRACT

This study examined six Beacon centers, which are community centers located in public school buildings that offer a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends. Individual Beacons are managed by community-based organizations. The study examined how the Beacons provided opportunities for youth development, school linkages, family involvement and support, and neighborhood safety and community building; who participated in which Beacon services activities; and benefits of participation. Data were collected via site and activity observations, youth surveys and interviews, and interviews with Beacon, lead agency, and school staff and community adults. Overall, Beacons offered youth a place to grow through challenging activities, caring relationships, and opportunities to contribute to the Beacon and their communities. Youth development activity quality made a difference in outcomes. Beacons provided important services and activities for neighborhood adults, who were satisfied with the services. While Beacons succeeded in bringing community members into schools, they were less successful in connecting schools and Beacons to one another. Beacons played a role in host communities as valued local institutions. Recommendations are provided in such areas as gender issues, group size, bullying, staff training, and hiring. (SM)

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A Place to Grow

EVALUATION OF THE NEW YORK CITY BEACONS

SUMMARY REPORT

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A Place to Grow

EVALUATION OF THE NEW YORK CITY BEACONS

SUMMARY REPORT

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Academy for Educational Development

New York City
2002

Introduction

This report presents findings from an intensive study of six Beacon centers, the second phase of an evaluation of the New York City Beacons initiative. Beacons are community centers located in public school buildings, offering a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends. Individual Beacons are managed by community-based organizations and work collaboratively with their host schools, community advisory councils, and a wide range of neighborhood organizations and institutions.

The New York City Beacons initiative was begun in 1991 with municipal Safe Streets, Safe Cities funding. By the time Phase I of the evaluation began in fall 1997, 40 Beacons served more than 76,000 youth and 33,000 adults. As of 2001, the program includes 80 Beacons, with at least one operating in each of the 32 local school districts in New York City and several in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Individual Beacons offer children, youth, and adults a wide range of recreational programs, social services, educational enrichment, and vocational activities in four core areas: youth-development programming, academic support and enhancement, parent involvement and family support, and neighborhood safety and community building.

Funded and administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the Beacons are an important example of a partnership between city government and a nonprofit agency. New York City has invested not only funds but also the expertise of DYCD personnel in supporting the development and operation of the Beacons, expanding the initiative to make it the largest municipally funded youth initiative in the country. In addition to DYCD, the initiative is supported by technical assistance provided by the Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York.

The Beacon Evaluation

YDI commissioned an evaluation of the Beacons initiative to gain information and insights to improve individual sites and the initiative as a whole and determine the impact of the Beacons on youth, families, schools, and communities. The evaluation was conducted as a collaborative effort of the Academy for Educational Development (AED), the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, and the Hunter College Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community Health.

Phase I of the evaluation included an implementation study documenting and analyzing how the Beacon concept and theory of change were realized at the 40 Beacon sites. It also included an analysis of program elements to determine the extent to which the Beacons implemented activities, programs, and services in the four areas noted above: youth-development programming, academic support, family, and community. The implementation study, released in 1999, found that although the Beacons varied in the extent of implementation, all sites had been

successful in serving as a "safe haven," offering a range of activities for youth and adults, as well as some community-improvement activities.

During Phase II of the evaluation, an intensive study looked at how the Beacon initiative affected youth and their parents, the host schools, and the surrounding communities in six sites selected from the 40 Beacons. It also examined if and how variations in site and program quality affected youth attitudes and behaviors. Chapin Hall helped design the Phase II evaluation. AED and Hunter staff collected data during spring and fall 1999. AED analyzed the findings and produced this final report.

From Youth About the Beacon

The Beacon plays a big role in our lives—personal, emotional, everything, problems at school, home—there is always a person to talk to.

You can be yourself at the Beacon. You won't get yelled at for expressing your opinion.

I've grown up with these people. I have friends and I have support. They're like a second family.

Everyone feels close. This is like my second home.

I come to the Beacon to work, play sports, do my homework or hang out with friends in a relaxed, positive and safe environment.

I like it here because I'm with my friends and we have fun.

The intensive-study sites were selected through a stratified random sample to represent the full range of Beacons as then operating in New York City. Using information gathered during the implementation study, evaluators ranked the Beacons according to the completeness of their implementation in the four core areas of youth-development programming, academic support, family involvement, and community building. In general, the stratified random sample provided a good cross section of the Beacons in terms of distribution by geography and type of lead agency. Evaluators designated the first four sites "qualitative-study" sites to be studied in greater depth.

The six sites were located in all five boroughs of New York City and shared characteristics common to many urban neighborhoods: a diverse population in terms of race and ethnicity; a high percentage of single-parent, female-headed households on public assistance; a high percentage of youth in the population; and high rates of teen pregnancy, school dropout, and youth violence and crime. Since sites participated in the study with the understanding that they would remain anonymous, they are not identified in this report nor described in ways that would reveal their identity.

The intensive study was designed to answer the following questions:

- How and to what extent have the Beacons provided opportunities for youth development, school linkages, parent/family involvement and support, and neighborhood safety and community building?

- Who participates in which Beacon services and activities, and what are the patterns of participation?

- What are the benefits of participation in Beacon activities and services for youth, families, schools, and communities?

These questions were answered through four substudies focusing on different segments of the Beacon population: youth, adults, host school, and neighborhood. Each substudy used a different set of evaluation questions specific to the population. Methods included youth surveys and interviews; interviews with Beacon, lead agency, and school staff, as well as adults in the community; and site and activity observations.

The evaluation was not intended to provide a judgment on the Beacon initiative as a whole. The first phase of the evaluation found abundant evidence of the value of the Beacons. The purpose of the intensive study was to examine in greater depth how that value was manifest at different sites and for different groups of participants. Because the Beacon model has attracted national and international attention and investment, the primary focus of the second phase of the evaluation was an intensive examination of the practice of youth development within the Beacons, as well as a systematic documentation and analysis of the impact of youth-development practices on young people participating in the Beacons. This entailed assessing the quality of youth programming at the Beacons, particularly in terms of its educational value and its fostering of positive youth development in the four qualitative-study sites. Specifically, the evaluation examined the implementation and impact of the five characteristics central to YDI's youth-development framework, asking to what extent youth had opportunities to (1) participate in stimulating and engaging activities; (2) develop caring and trusting relationships; (3) be challenged to grow by high expectations; (4) connect with and contribute to their communities; and (5) benefit from a continuity of adult support.[1]

The evaluation also examined levels of quality in youth-development programming. The different outcomes for youth at

From Parents

The Beacon helps through supportive feedback about children that helps parents know what issues to focus on.

The Beacon is helping my child in math and reading because homework is different from when I went to school.

The Beacon taught my kids how to study.

My child's grades went up and her attendance is great.

They are like a second parent to my son.

The kids can talk to anyone here about anything.

[1] *Networks for Youth Development: A Guided Tour of Youth Development* (New York City: Youth Development Institute, 1993).

Beacons that more fully implemented good youth-development practice prompted the question of what constitutes high-quality youth-development practice and how it differs from practice of lower quality. While observing Beacon activities, evaluators paid particular attention to how well the principles of positive youth development were incorporated throughout the organization and across activities. In addition to analyzing the overall quality of the activity, evaluators looked at characteristics typical of excellent youth-development practice, and in particular at the five characteristics listed above.

From the Community

The school is the hub of the community now. The Beacon contributes to the positive image of the school in the community. (Principal of Beacon school)

The Beacon turns schools into something more than a building. (Principal of Beacon school)

There is more to life than just school education. The extra lessons they learn at the Beacon help to widen their vision, while feeding their desire to learn. (Beacon adult participant)

The Beacon helps people communicate better and know what is going on in the neighborhood. (Beacon adult participant)

The Beacon increases awareness of other neighbors. (Beacon adult participant)

Major Findings

Major findings are presented below for youth and youth-development practice, adults, the school, and the community.

Findings About Youth

- **The Beacons offer young people a place to grow through challenging activities, caring relationships, and opportunities to contribute to the Beacon and to their communities**. Both survey and interview findings indicated that the majority of young people were taking advantage of these challenging activities and believed they were developing new competencies because of their participation at the Beacon. When asked why they came to the Beacon, young people most frequently responded that Beacon activities were fun. In fact, at first glance, many Beacon activities do not look very different from traditional youth activities. However, at the Beacon, adults lead participants in stimulating, engaging activities that combine fun with opportunities to learn and develop the different competencies that youth will need as adults.

- **The youth-development quality of the Beacon environment and the activities offered to youth make a difference in outcomes.** Evaluators looked at both general and youth-development quality. The former included safety, well-organized activities, consistent enforcement of the rules, and low staff-youth ratio. The latter included the five elements of good youth-development programming noted above as central to YDI's framework. Findings indicated that youth-development quality—or the extent to which the

principles of good youth-development practice were implemented—in the Beacon environment and activities made a difference in youth outcomes.

In sites with higher youth-development quality, young people were more likely to:

- feel better about themselves at the Beacon;
- believe that youth of all races and ethnicities were valued at the Beacon;
- perceive that staff had high expectations for their behavior and performance; and
- report that the Beacon helped them learn leadership skills.

They were also less likely to report that they had:

- cut classes;
- hit others to hurt them;
- deliberately damaged other people's property;
- stolen money or other property; and
- been in a fight.[2]

Regression analyses showed that the quality of youth development was not correlated with overall school quality or neighborhood safety, and that the degree to which youth were potentially at risk was distributed across the intensive-study sites.

➢ **The Youth Development Institute (YDI) has played an important role in conceptualizing and promoting high-quality youth-development programming.** YDI offers a wide range of professional development opportunities for both Beacon directors and their staff who work with youth. These include monthly meetings of directors to help them incorporate a youth-development perspective into organizational behavior. YDI also provides access to

From Youth on Feeling Safe at the Beacon

I get to play here and it is much safer than hanging out.

I know if I get into a problem, I have friends; the counselors and the staff are here to look out for me.

All the people that work here make me feel safe.

There's no trouble here: you must show respect to one another.

I know nothing will happen because all the counselors are kind of like my parents.

Problems are stopped before they get serious. Fighting is rare.

[2]All differences were statistically significant after controlling for various external factors, including presence of adult support, participation in youth-development activities, and a composite factor measuring risk status, which included being from a single-parent home, getting mostly Ds and Fs last school year, getting suspended last year, cutting class this year, and being over-age for grade. For the cutting-class regression, cutting class was excluded from the risk factor.

From Youth on Conflict

They make us learn to talk out our problems and learn to get along.

When I first came here, I was really rude and I was suspended three times for fighting. Now I can get along with everybody.

I used to blow up for everything. I've learned to control myself.

They've taught us to walk away, to cool off and then discuss it.

Adults encourage us to talk to each other first. Talking is better than fighting over something.

They make us learn to talk out our problems and learn to get along.

training where Beacon staff can learn the principles and practices of positive youth development. However, attending YDI meetings for Beacon directors and taking advantage of YDI staff training opportunities are voluntary, and not all sites do so regularly. Those sites with staff most frequently attending YDI meetings and training activities had the highest-rated youth-development quality and the most positive youth findings. In addition, these sites were also more likely to send staff for other kinds of youth-work training. In short, the extent to which the New York City Beacons have become a model for youth-development programming owes much to YDI's capacity-building work.

- **Homework help and academic support are important and valued youth activities at the Beacons.** Young people of all ages frequently cited the availability of homework assistance in response to questions about what they liked most about the Beacons and why they would recommend it to their friends. Parents mentioned the homework-help activities as the second most positive aspect of the Beacons after the presence of a safe and welcoming environment.

Findings About Youth-Development Practice

Analysis of evidence from observations of the Beacons and their activities revealed three levels of youth-development practice at the qualitative-study sites—basic, satisfactory, and exemplary:

- **Basic (participating):** Youth are participating—in the program, off the street, out of harm's way, forming bonds with peers and learning the basics of social behavior.

- **Satisfactory (engaged):** Youth clearly are engaged and interested in what they are doing and are more likely to return to these activities on a continuing basis.

- **Exemplary (generative):** Youth are generating new strengths and competencies in activities that stretch them and stimulate their growth.

The evaluators observed these levels in all five areas characteristic of the YDI youth-development framework. Those sites with greater implementation of youth-development practice in the five areas were the sites with better youth outcomes, as described above.

Findings About Adults

- **The Beacons provide important services and activities for neighborhood adults.** Numerous adults from the local communities reported participating in sports and physical fitness activities, basic education, English-language instruction, GED preparation, and computer instruction. Survey and interview data indicated that adults valued the Beacon for what it provided both themselves and their children.

- **Parents of youth attending the Beacon praised its family-oriented activities and services.** Parents cited the Beacon's workshops and counseling for helping them learn to communicate better with their children and their children's teachers. More than half these parents reported attending meetings and activities in their children's schools and credited the Beacon with helping them do so.

- **More than half of adults surveyed across all sites (54%) did not have children at the Beacon.** This suggests that the Beacon is casting a wide net and serving as a true community center rather than simply as an extension of the school.

Findings About Schools

- **The Beacons have been successful in bringing community members into the school building, but less so in connecting the school and Beacon to one another.** Despite efforts on the part of the Beacons to make school staff aware of their presence and what they offer children, only a relatively small proportion of school staff felt informed about the Beacon in their building, and an even smaller group had participated in Beacon activities or worked for the Beacon.

From Youth on Leadership

We go to different meetings and everybody is listened to, especially if we want something changed.

It teaches responsibility because you have kids under your care. They trust us enough to work with kids. It's a huge responsibility.

They teach us to be independent. The staff tells you not to follow the people, to follow yourself.

They teach us how to be young adults, showing us the way the world works and how we can make it better.

- **There is an untapped resource in the Beacons to organize parents around school issues and provide information about working with individual teachers and the school as a whole.** Those staff who were informed about the Beacon were generally positive about its potential to help the school in the areas of student behavior and self-esteem, as well as to connect students and families to needed community resources.

Findings About Community

- **Beacons play a role in their host communities as valued local institutions.** Community residents were well aware of the Beacon's presence, despite little advertising and its location within a school building.

- **Among those residents aware of its presence, the Beacon was very positively perceived.** Of those who had heard about the Beacon, more than half rated their neighborhood Beacon as good; an additional quarter rated it as excellent. Just under one-third of them (31%) had heard about the Beacon from a friend.

- **Community residents who had heard about the Beacon had slightly more positive perspectives on the social cohesion of their neighborhood**. They were more likely to agree that the community was one where people looked out for one another's children and where people did not keep to themselves. This was the case even though their other perceptions of the neighborhood frequently were more negative than the perceptions of people unaware of the Beacon.

From Youth on School

The homework-help people make me understand it better than anyone else.

They give us the attention we don't get in school.

I used to have 70s and now I'm doing better. I love math, now.

They pay attention to our grades and how we are doing in school.

They make you get serious about planning for college and setting goals for your education.

I did nothing in school but sit around. People here kept telling me I can do it. They motivated me. I even did extra credit for science.

From Youth on Risk-Taking Behaviors

They enforce the thought that we are not supposed to steal or do something that hurts other people.

People try to push you to do negative things in the street. That doesn't happen in the Beacon.

The staff teaches us that there are consequences to this behavior.

They teach us how violence escalates. Fighting can turn into gun shooting. If you join a gang, then you have a bunch of other problems.

If I were to drink alcohol or do drugs and the kids see me, it would hurt them and it would hurt me because they look up to me.

Every time I have a problem, they tell me to walk away, don't do the bad things, do the good things. Don't follow what the other kids are doing if they do something bad.

OTHER FINDINGS

- **Beacon activities have the potential to help prevent risky adolescent behaviors.** By their nature, the broadly based youth activities at the Beacon differed from the kind of problem-focused prevention activities that have become common in recent years. At the same time, they did address some of the same prevention issues. In fact, the Beacons' potential as a platform for community-based health education was evident. The majority of young people reported that they had participated in discussions on drugs and alcohol and on sexuality, reproductive health, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Students who reported participating frequently in discussions on alcohol and drugs were significantly less likely to report having used marijuana in the two previous months. Moreover, the preventive messages of these activities were strengthened and legitimized because they were conveyed by adults and older youth who had already earned the respect and trust of Beacon youth.

- **Cross-age activities are a valuable part of the Beacon experience for many young people.** Most sites provided significant opportunities for older and younger youth to be together, and more than three-quarters of youth reported having helped someone younger at the Beacon. Sometimes this occurred within an activity open to youth of different ages. In addition, older youth helped out with activities for younger children as either volunteers or paid staff. Overall, there was a good deal of informal interaction among different age groups. Whatever the situation, in interviews, older youth repeatedly mentioned that they felt responsible to serve as role models for younger children, and that seeing themselves in this way helped them avoid negative behaviors such as fighting or using drugs.

From Youth on Beacon Staff

They respect us, and when we play they look out for us and make sure we don't get hurt.

If you walk in upset, the workers will ask you why you are upset. I feel good that they care.

I trust the staff. They help me and don't let the problem get out of control. They care about me and come from my neighborhood so they'll back me up and show me the right things to do.

The staff is always encouraging. They tell us not to give up.

My parents split and I started acting out. The people here talked to me and told me not to blame myself and to talk to my mother. Things worked out.

- **Youth leadership develops from opportunities to contribute at the Beacon.** Youth at the Beacons reported that they were learning leadership skills. Although young people had many formal opportunities to develop leadership skills, when youth were interviewed about what skills the Beacon helped them develop, they often described learning right from wrong and learning how to resolve conflicts, be independent, and help and teach others. These forms of moral leadership appeared to be more important to youth than other types of leadership skills.

- **The Beacons have benefited from the public-private partnership between the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development and the Youth Development Institute**. DYCD has provided continuous fiscal support for the Beacons, despite changes in mayoral administration, and appointed a deputy commissioner for Beacon programs, in recognition of the need to sustain the growing number of Beacons as the initiative expanded. DYCD has also provided numerous supports benefiting both new and old Beacons, including a Beacon manual, contract-monitoring procedures aligned with youth-development principles, an automated contract-development process, and monthly directors' meetings for all Beacon directors. These meetings were used as a major vehicle for disseminating new information and as an opportunity to support Beacons around common challenges (e.g., structuring and running advisory councils), as well as to inform Beacon directors about available training opportunities for themselves and their staff.

In summary, the evaluation found that the Beacons provided more that the usual "gym and swim" of traditional recreational programs for youth. By providing youth with a range of developmental opportunities and supports, they are, in the words of one evaluator, "not just a place to go, but a place to grow."

Recommendations and Questions for Further Study

Several issues arose from AED's evaluation of the New York City Beacons: some should be heeded by existing and new programs; others could benefit from further study. These issues include:

- Gender patterns in activities
- Effect of size on program quality
- Bullying and teasing
- Attention to entry of new youth into the Beacon
- Training of younger staff
- Training in youth work
- Staff hired from community
- Availability of opportunities for youth leadership
- Attention to youth with severe academic difficulties
- Attention to risk-taking behavior
- Attention to youth-development and educational quality of programming
- Informing school staff about the Beacon

These are discussed briefly below.

Gender Issues

Traditional gender patterns were revealed in responses to survey questions about youth participation in different activities, with boys outnumbering girls in athletic activities. Girls dominated homework help, arts and crafts, creative and performing arts, family life/sex education sessions, and computer instruction. Some sites had begun to recognize and address these sex-stereotyped participation patterns, but this is clearly an area where more attention would be helpful.

Group Size

Group size emerged as a critical factor in effective programming. For example, small group size was a facilitating factor in staff's ability to incorporate elements of good youth-development practice into an activity. The smaller the group, the more likely evaluators were to see the development of caring and trusting relationships among youth; the availability of adult support—both in general and manifested in high expectations for young people's performance and behavior; and the flexibility to allow young people to contribute to running the activity. In addition, in larger activities, evaluators sometimes saw interpersonal conflict and bullying and teasing that were not well managed by staff. Lastly, there were some activities with large size and/or inadequately trained staff that did little more than fill time. Unfortunately, this was more frequently the case with educational activities than with other types of activity.

Bullying and Teasing

Bullying and teasing also posed a problem, particularly in large-group activities, and sometimes were not recognized or well addressed. In particular, while boy-on-girl intimidation was often seen as unacceptable, boy-on-boy intimidation was viewed as "boys being boys." These findings suggest that Beacon staff need additional training on how to create an environment in which bullying and teasing are not tolerated and in which differences are dealt with in a positive manner. Further investigation of the kinds of difference-related issues that underlie bullying and teasing behavior at the Beacons would be useful in designing specific training to help staff address these issues, both specifically in terms of bullying and teasing and also more generally in creating a supportive, tolerant, and emotionally safe environment for all children.

Attention to Entry of New Youth

Some younger participants reported problems making friends at the Beacon with youth who were not in their existing social circles or did not attend their elementary schools. Beacon staff may be able to bridge this gap with more attention to facilitating the entry of new youth.

Training of Younger Staff

Youth in all age groups complained in interviews about younger Beacon staff members who sometimes yelled and screamed at them and treated them with disrespect. Although some of this behavior may reflect an abuse of authority on the part of these staff members, it is likely that they have weaker group-management skills and need help building a repertoire of approaches to handling youth respectfully.

Training in Youth Work

Observation of youth activities and interviews with their staff leaders showed that the degree to which staff were trained in working with young people was reflected in the quality of the activities. Better trained staff were more "intentional" in their work with youth, particularly in the way they challenged them to grow, and better able both to manage groups and respond to individual needs. In addition, observations also revealed an uneven level of training among staff. More consistent investment in improving the skills of youth staff would increase the quality of experiences for youth at the Beacons.

Staff Hired from Community

Beacons have made an effort to hire staff from the communities they serve, which often means that young people see staff members with whom they share a common racial or ethnic background. This is different from the frequent practice in other afterschool programs of hiring teachers, who often are not from the same cultural background or residential area as the young people with whom they work. It would be useful to know the added-value of hiring community-based staff, particularly with regard to their ability to act as role models for youth. At the same time, for afterschool educational activities to have the maximum value, the presence of some teachers can also be valuable.

Availability of Opportunities for Youth Leadership

Survey data showed an uneven availability of opportunities for all youth to contribute and develop leadership skills across the sites. Some sites adhered to the philosophy that all youth have leadership potential, while, in others, there were clearly individuals who were being groomed for

leadership. Given the demonstrated benefits of such opportunities to foster leadership skills among youth, it would be preferable if all youth were offered at least some opportunities to lead and received the support to do so.

Attention to Youth with Academic Difficulties

Despite the overwhelmingly positive youth responses about academic programs at the Beacon, a small minority of participants described homework help as not very useful because it was too distracting to complete homework with so many other youth around. These same participants reported that their schoolwork was not very good. This coincides with program observations noting that participants with serious academic deficiencies may need more substantial homework support and academic assistance. This suggests that Beacon education staff may benefit from additional training to help them identify youth with more serious academic needs, as well as linkages to other resources to help these young people.

Attention to Risk-Taking Behavior

Nearly one-fifth of young male participants at the Beacons reported using alcohol and marijuana in the previous two months, and almost that many young women reported recent alcohol use despite a wide variety of substance abuse prevention programs at the Beacon. These numbers are still high enough to suggest that more young people at the Beacon need to participate in frequent discussions and prevention activities about drugs and alcohol.

Attention to Youth-Development and Educational Quality of Programming

Observation data showed some routine and unimaginative Beacon activities that missed the opportunity to support the development of young people. This was particularly true in large activities, as well as with some academically focused activities, such as homework help. A review of the evidence suggests that additional attention to how activities help young people grow, both academically and socially, would result in more consistent youth-development and educational quality across activities.

Informing School Staff About the Beacon

Only a relatively small proportion of school staff felt informed about the Beacon in their building, and an even smaller group had participated in Beacon activities or worked for the Beacon. However, those staff who were informed about the Beacon had largely positive perceptions of it and represent an underused resource, both in terms of student referrals to the Beacon and collaborations between school and Beacon staff to help needy youth.

In summary, the Beacons clearly play a key role in the education and development of their young participants, as well as in the lives of their families and communities. Attention to the issues described above would ensure that the Beacons continue to play this pivotal role.

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For copies of the full evaluation report, contact Elayne Archer at 212-367-4568 or earcher@aed.org. Copies of this summary report are downloadable at www.aed.org/scs under Publications.

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